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Towards Democratic Education: Working-Class Learning in Tillie Olsen and Raymond Williams

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"Towards Democratic Education: Working-Class Learning in Tillie Olsen and Raymond Williams"

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ABSTRACT

Tillie Olsen's *Yonnondio* and Raymond Williams' "Culture is Ordinary" explore the untapped potential of working-class people and the beauties of even the most difficult lives. Though they were written two decades apart, "Culture is Ordinary" builds upon *Yonnondio*'s glimpses into a healthy and productive democratic educational process that could emerge from the positive aspects of working-class experiences. Both works investigate the difficult conditions which the children of laborers face in schools that ignore their needs and present them with irrelevant and useless material that reflects only a static and elitist form of culture. Williams defines culture in a dynamic and more inclusive way, insisting that every individual shapes the culture of his or her society and that culture is not merely a reservoir of elite traditions. Rather, culture is both historical and made every day in every mind and the cultures of elites and working people exist alongside one another.

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They are a neglected group, those who spend most of their time laboring in order to survive, but they are nevertheless a vibrant majority whose marginalization forecloses great insights into their productive culture. While the conditions of working life can be harmful, many people of the proletariat find ways to survive and thrive. Yet their culture is often unacknowledged by educational and cultural institutions although they are everyday people and part of everyone's everyday life. They are the people who clean, construct, serve, package, and prepare the things we use and depend upon every day of our lives. Tillie Olsen and Raymond Williams are two authors who have shed light on these people whose culture exists on the fringes while their presence is everywhere. These authors demonstrate that working-class culture contains much potential and beauty despite the exploitation and poverty that working people endure. Specifically, Olsen criticizes formal classroom settings as sites for the oppression of the laboring class and Williams exposes the ways in which a narrow definition of culture has created undemocratic schooling practices in which ordinary people's culture and input are neglected . While both authors criticize the educational institutions of their time, they identify alternate, democratic forms of learning as a source of empowerment for working people. As a result, they promote a revolution in education which will value and extend the forms of knowledge contained in working-class cultures.

Though their life paths were divergent, Olsen and Williams' similar radical analyses of proletarian learning and culture stem from their own experiences as members of laboring families. Born in 1912, Tillie Olsen was a lifelong member of the working-

class whose experience of the Great Depression in the United States is expressed in her masterpiece, *Yonnondio*. Olsen started writing the novel in 1932, when she was a pregnant nineteen-year-old who had become involved in the Communist Party. She dropped out of high school and began working as a menial laborer while she was involved with union organizing and political protest. Olsen was unable to complete the novel because of the competing demands of motherhood, work, and activism.[1] When Olsen returned to the manuscript and published the incomplete novel in the 1970's, it gained critical acclaim and attention, as the themes of *Yonnondio* resonated with second wave feminism and the protest movements' focus on income inequality. However, *Yonnondio* has sunk back into obscurity along with the fight for economic equality. The novel's content is compelling and relevant to current issues and its very existence demonstrates the power of one working-class author. Its marginalization reflects the continuing systemic neglect of workers and their communities. Raymond Williams' work, on the other hand, is well known. That is because Williams was able to attend the prestigious Cambridge University through scholarships. He was born in 1921, making him younger than Olsen and his childhood less deeply marked by the devastating effects of the Great Depression. As part of a rural Welsh working-class family, Williams' experiences differed from Olsen's who experienced both country and city in her travels as a Communist Party organizer. After leaving the Party, both Olsen and Williams remained politically active as democratic socialists throughout their lives.[2]

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[1] Panthea Reid, *Tillie Olsen One Woman, Many Riddles* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers UP, 2010)

[2] Raymond Williams, *Politics and Letters: Interviews with New Left Review* (London: NLB, 1979)

Their different experiences of the Great Depression, the working communities which they grew up in, their educational experiences, nationalities, and gender all influenced Olsen and Williams' different perspectives on working-class culture. In his 1958 essay "Culture is Ordinary," Williams offers a more uplifting tone than does *Yonnondio* reflecting Williams' own more positive experiences in a tight knit rural community that had weathered many of the struggles of the Depression by the time Williams was a teenager. As a working mother and survivor of the Great Depression, Olsen emphasizes hardship and suffering in her work. *Yonnondio* and "Culture is Ordinary" belong together because of their shared concern with working-class education and their sometimes diverging outlook on this topic. Together they offer a combined image of working-class culture, capturing both the positive and negative aspects of lives filled with labor and oppression, but also solidarity and creativity. Ultimately, both works represent and are proof of a productive working-class movement. As that movement has dwindled, the significance of viewing *Yonnondio* and "Culture is Ordinary" together becomes even greater because they record and teach in their own ways about the radical wing of the labor movement that reached one apex in the 1930's but has since been ignored and many of its gains reversed. Learning from that movement can help to regain and further advance strong working-class movements today which can combat economic injustice.

Olsen's *Yonnondio* exposes the deficient educational environment faced by the children of laborers in the 1920's and which children in poor schools continue to confront today. By representing classrooms filled with working-class children, *Yonnondio* demonstrates how their fear, anger, and deprivation are not eased by school. Instead, the

negative effects of their parents' exploitation and oppression get carried over into the classroom. Children feel alienated from their peers and teachers, leading them to perform poorly in an educational system that has been designed by the owning class to produce manual laborers who are easily exploited in order to maximize profits. The owning class restricts working-class access to learning materials and promotes content which is irrelevant to the children's needs. As a result, proletarian children turn away from school and they lack the solidarity necessary to rebel against their oppression and exploitation. Working parents fear the alienation that may result between themselves and their children in such an educational setting which neglects their ways of life.

In her analysis, Olsen turns to working-class culture in order to explore solutions to the problems children encounter in schools. She highlights how the struggles of a working life can provide nourishment for living a fulfilling life, pointing out that while the classroom tends to stifle learning and creativity, working-class culture promotes these outside of the classroom. In the educational activities which they create outside of school, poor children become invested in learning because in these activities they find relevance and practicality for their survival and personal growth. The novel offers the dump and the Holbrook family's foraging outing as models for education that are conducive to working-class learning. In these settings, children experience independence and freedom to create as they shed their burdens and feel connected to one another in order to learn. These positive learning experiences help to combat the dreary educational environment created in the classroom.

Mazie Holbrook's first day at a new school begins with terror. The family, consisting of five children and two parents, has just moved from their failed farm in

South Dakota to the packing town of Omaha, Nebraska. Before that, the Holbrooks struggled in a Wyoming mining town. They have moved from place to place, attempting to escape poverty and find better economic opportunities. At the packing town school the teacher makes Mazie stand in front of the class with her younger brother Will. As the other children stare up at her threateningly Mazie feels fearful. The children are so weighed down by the burdens of their lives that they cannot find solidarity. Mazie thinks "Faces mad and tired and scared and hungry and dead and their eyes like they want to eat you up. No, don't look at the faces, look out the window—but it is greasy, like drippings was smeared all over, and stink comes from the top, comes in and fills the room" (50). As Mazie stands before her peers she looks into their faces and sees their vulnerabilities. Though Mazie is frightened by them she recognizes that they are "tired," exhausted by their circumstances, and "hungry" for the basic human sustenance that they lack and desire. The children are "tired," presumably from performing the physical and mental labor required for surviving working-class life, yet they remain "hungry," demonstrating the futility of their attempts to better their lives. They are stuck in a cycle of poverty despite their labors and suffering—a burden which they carry into the classroom. In their "mad" and "scared" faces, Mazie sees their fear but also their aggression which makes her, in turn, fearful. Her fear of them causes her to turn away, thinking "No, don't look at the faces." Despite their shared struggles, Mazie cannot face her peers and instead she fears them. She perceives death in their drained and petrified faces and she sees their starvation, making them seem dangerous to her. As a result, she feels them encroaching on her, fearing that "they want to eat you up." Mazie sees her peers as the living dead,

who can sustain themselves only by feeding on one another. The classroom becomes a frightening tomb of alienated half-dead children trying to consume each other.

Mazie seeks to escape this tomb mentally by turning to the world outside, but she cannot: the dirty windows remind her that she is trapped. “Greasy” windows, as if “smeared” with “drippings,” and the “stink” that “fills the room” serve as constant reminders of the children’s degradation. The slaughterhouse that exploits their parents’ labor also infiltrates the lives of the children through the penetrating stench, filth, and ugliness that enters the school. When Mazie attempts to find release from the tomb-like classroom by looking out through the windows, it is the waste of the slaughterhouse that prevents her from mentally withdrawing from the fear caused by the classroom. The “stink” created by the industrial mass killing of animals and tearing of flesh not only penetrates their parents during the work day, but it also drifts into the school and invades the children’s bodies, as it “fills the room.” Mazie not only perceives her classmates as “dead” due to their facial expressions, but also because they carry death within them in the form of the penetrating “stink” that is produced by butchered livestock. Though schools should protect children, within the classroom Mazie’s peers continue to be vulnerable to the oppressive working conditions their parents must endure. The children are not able to create solidarity against the overwhelming living situation caused by their poverty as the difficulty of their lives keeps them alienated from one another. The hunger, anger, and fear that result from their depravation cause the children to keep their distance from another. At school, they are not able to find relief from their impoverished living conditions as the slaughterhouse enters classrooms through the stench of death and by

keeping them in a cycle of poverty which makes them “mad,” “tired,” “scared,” “hungry,” and “dead” and therefore unable to reach out to one another.

These children are alienated not only from each other in the classroom, but also from their teachers. Before her first day in the packing town classroom, Mazie’s first educational experience is in a Wyoming country school where her teacher shames her. Instead of attempting to produce a positive learning environment, the teacher pathologizes her, restricting her learning and intellectual growth. Olsen explains that, for Mazie,

> The playground squirming with kids was wonderful, but the teacher that waddled and held her head like a duck, and her wheezing horror—‘Eight years old and can’t read yet, you’ll have to go in the first grade with your brother Will’—was shame. Yet the lessons came easy—the crooked white worms of words on the second-grade blackboard magically transformed into words known and said, although they were still stumbling over the first-grade alphabet. Finding the two could suddenly read, the teacher put them both up one grade, but the primer already breathlessly raced through with only silly sentences as a reward, they spent most of their time listening secretly to the upper grades recite jography and history—far countries, strange peoples. (34)

The conventional educational course charted by her teacher is clearly problematic. Her teacher has chosen an inappropriate educational plan due to her lack of understanding of Mazie as an individual student. The teacher does not attempt to know her students intimately and, as a result, Mazie views her not as a fellow human being, but as a

waddling “duck” whose “wheezing horror” alienates her from the students. While Mazie finds the part of the school day in which she can interact with her classmates on the “playground squirming with kids” “wonderful,” the teacher dampens her experience of school by shaming her in the classroom. The teacher humiliates her by pointing out in front of the whole class that she is not at the grade level deemed appropriate for her age. As a result of this misplaced line of thinking, the teacher places her in the first grade, though her intelligence shines as “the lessons came easy” in that grade level and she moves on to “the crooked white worms of words on the second-grade blackboard” which she comprehends as they are “magically transformed into words known and said.” Despite her unproductive pedagogy, the teacher does not succeed in destroying Mazie’s pleasure in learning as she finds magic in reading and understanding words. Mazie and her brother are moved to the second grade, where she again excels. With the second grade “primer already breathlessly raced through,” she exceeds the basics of that grade and looks to more advanced grade levels, “listening secretly to the upper grades recite jography and history.” Clearly, it is the thrill and challenge of new information and material that make learning exciting, however the teachers never hone in on this to teach productively. Continually, Mazie’s abilities and skills are underappreciated because she is pathologized by her teachers, causing her to be placed in grade levels that move too slowly for her.

In addition to restricting children’s intellectual growth by placing them in predefined grade levels and rigid learning paths, the content of the school system is also problematic for these poor children. As Jim Holbrook, Mazie’s father, reflects on the cycles of poverty which his family is kept in due to labor exploitation, he thinks angrily

that it is “no fun to see the younguns pulpy with charity starches drowse and chant the lesson after the teacher: we-are-the-richest-country-in-the-worr-uld” (64). In his thoughts Jim contrasts the “charity starches” that his family must depend upon for survival with the “chant” his children must repeat at school, a “chant” that attempts to cover up their hardships by claiming that they belong to “the-richest-country-in-the-worr-uld.” While the Holbrook family struggles in poverty, the children are told in school that they are citizens of a rich country—a claim that contradicts their experience. Though the children repeat “we” in the phrase, they are excluded from the wealth of their country because they must depend on “charity starches” which cause them to look “pulpy,” at once bloated and weak. Their only source of aid, charity, marks the children as “pulpy” and impoverished and further removes them from the image of American wealth. Although she sees that her students are ill-fed and unwell, the teacher continues to make the children repeat the “chant,” demonstrating that her teaching is neglectfully out of touch with her students’ needs. As a result, the students are not stimulated and they disengage from the educational process, becoming passive and sleepy as they “drowse” during the lesson. Like the “pulpy” “charity starches” this learning process does not provide the nourishment that the children need to grow and strengthen. Jim is angry that his children must repeat a phrase which directly contradicts his family’s experience and struggles. In this way, both children and parents are at odds with an educational system that actively denies the realities of their lives.

Because the educational system shames children instead of promoting intellectual growth and providing content which is relevant to their needs, working-class children lose interest in and harbor negative feelings towards school and books. In a scene at the

local library, Olsen depicts the efficiency with which those who have control of the community maintain a steady stream of manual laborers by preventing the community from accessing and becoming invested in intellectual endeavors, providing them instead with low quality materials in an unappealing location. At the same time, Olsen pinpoints that it is unproductive pedagogy which turns children away from books as Mazie's mother, Anna, holds on to her love of texts outside of the school setting. While Anna treasures books, the children cannot get far enough away from them:

> One afternoon Anna cleans up the kids and brings them to her Temple of Learning. A squat dirty converted storefront (good enough for packingtown, they said) shelved with opiates and trash and marvels (from which most of the children are already turned in outraged self-respect, for is it not through books, the printed word, or so it seemed, that they had been judged poor learners, dumb dumb dumb? Told: what is in us has nothing to do with you).
>
> But marvels to Anna *(places your body aint ever been, cant ever get to; inside people's heads; things you wouldnt ever know)*; keys, too, in that door to a better life on which opportunity would knock some day. She took out a library card for each. Only Ben pored over his (picture) books. Mazie's and Will's lay untouched. For how onceuponatime and theylivedhappilyeverafter fairy tales which the librarian had selected for Mazie? how adventure and magic books she had picked for Will, when there is the adventure and fairy ground of dump and city; the conjurer magic of a shining screen in darkness Saturdays. (107)

The library is Anna's "Temple of Learning" because she has learned from books on her own, but the children have been turned away from books by the ways in which schools have used them as tools for judgment. Anna sees books as "keys" "to a better life," but the children see books as preventing them from living good lives because the educational system has used them to shame them as "poor learners." The children reject the library books "in outraged self-respect" because teachers have used books to pathologize them as "dumb dumb dumb." But Olsen explains why the children actually do so poorly with books: "onceuponatime and theylivedhappilyeverafter fairy tales" are not relevant to these children's needs and experiences. These books, like the chant "we-are-the-richest-country-in-the-worr-uld," deny the hardships that working-class children observe and live through. Instead of offering them practical guidance or an opportunity to explore their situation, "onceuponatime and theylivedhappilyeverafter fairy tales" are stuck in the past and simplify life by depicting perfect resolutions to conflicts while the children witness abuse and oppression all around them. The children prefer the "adventure and fairy ground of dump and city" as well as "the conjurer magic of a shining screen" at the movies to books and formal learning because at these places they are not graded and judged and they are free to establish their own paths for learning based on their needs and their own capacity for imagining.

To those who have the power to make decisions about the community but are not part of the working class, books are not necessary for the poor and a "squat dirty converted storefront" is "good enough for packingtown." Because slaughterhouse work does not require reading skills, only physical strength, those who have power provide few opportunities for learning. The workers of "packingtown" must dig through "opiates and

trash" in order to find the "marvels" within the library. Anna's children internalize "their" idea that working-class people have little need for education, imagining that books reject them by saying "what is in us has nothing to do with you." The educational system reinforces "their" notion that working life and educational resources are incompatible by not relating learning materials to students' distinct needs as members of the proletariat. In this way, "they" pipeline the working-class into exploitative manual labor by turning the children away from intellectual growth that may lead to class consciousness, solidarity, and social mobility.

Though Anna and Jim want their children to get an education, they, like their children have reasons to turn away from schooling. They are both cautiously optimistic about the future that it can provide for their children, imagining that gaining an education will give their children better lives than they have had, but also recognizing that it will distance them from their children in the future. When Mazie asks her mother what an education is, "Anna Holbrook arose from amidst the shifting vapors of the washtub, and with the suds dripping over her red hands, walked over and stood impressively over Mazie." Anna then tells her that "An edjication is what you kids are going to get. It means your hands stay white and you read books and work in an office. Now, get the kids and scat. But don't go too far, or I'll knock your block off" (3). A working life has given Anna "red hands," but she envisions Mazie's future as one in which her "hands stay white" through "work in an office," instead of a life like her own, filled with the "shifting vapors of the washtub" and "dripping suds." Although Anna hopes that "An edjication is what you kids are going to get," she also warns Mazie "don't go too far, or I'll knock your block off," fearing distance from her child. Anna not only fears that Mazie will "go

too far" and away from her sight and protection at that moment, but also that Mazie's educational attainment will intellectually, spatially, and socially distance Mazie from her. Anna's ambivalent feelings about education come through not only in her contradictory remarks, as she both tells Mazie that she will get an education and not to go too far, but also in her hopeful and loving, yet angry tone.

Jim's reaction to the thought of his children getting an education is as ambiguous as Anna's. He finds out that Anna has been speaking to Mazie about schooling: "Fillin the kid's head with fool ideas, he thought wrathfully. But she could become a teacher. Aloud—'Sure you are [going to get an education]. 'You'll go to college and read books and marry a—' his stomach revolted at the thought of a mine boss—'a doctor. And,' he finished, 'eat on white tablecloths'" (9). Jim believes that Anna is "Fillin the kid's head with fool ideas" because he is not entirely confident that education is a positive force. He thinks resentfully or "wrathfully" about Mazie getting an education since he knows that he may lose his daughter as a consequence. However, he recognizes the positive effects that an education would have on Mazie: "she could become a teacher," "go to college and read books," "eat on white tablecloths." An education would move her into a higher social class and might enable her to marry a doctor. Unfortunately, the social class of a doctor and the one which Mazie may inhabit also includes those who exploit labor, like "a mine boss"—a thought against which Jim's "stomach revolted." The idea that his daughter could be in the same social circles as those who exploit his labor nauseates Jim. Despite his misgivings about Mazie's educational prospects, Jim only vocalizes the positive possibilities while keeping silent about his concerns. In this way, a working-class perspective on education remains unexpressed and unheard, allowing the wealthy

exploiters' pathologizing of working-class people to stand unchallenged. While Anna believes that education provides opportunities and expands the mind, Jim focuses on the material benefits that an education can provide his children. For Anna, the negative aspect of educational attainment is that it will create distance between her and her children as they move on to better living conditions, while Jim's view of the alienation that results from education is based on an understanding of class in which an educated, owning class typically exploits less educated laborers. Still, both parents desire for their children to reap the benefits of education.

Despite the ways in which schools are problematic for working families, Olsen demonstrates that a life of labor provides alternative, fertile grounds for personal development. Unlike the Holbrooks who were born into poverty, Old Man Caldwell, a neighbor of the Holbrooks at the South Dakota farm, chose to live among poor tenant farmers. He had previously lived an easy life, but instead chose to experience first-hand the fertility of working life: "Once I lived in softness and ease and sickened. Once I chose a stern life, turning to people hard, bitter and strong—obscure people, the smell and sweat about them—the smell of life…" (38) Dying in his bed, he tells Mazie, "Whatever happens, remember, everything, the nourishment, the roots you need are where you are now" (38). Working people, though they may grow "hard" and "bitter" from laboring constantly, also grow "strong" from these endless toils and they exude "the smell of life" through the sweat which signifies their intimate knowledge of human struggle. Through the suffering and survival strategies that must be employed in this complex way of living, it has more to offer Caldwell than a life of "softness and ease." Privileged people may try to "obscure" the lives of working people in order to erase the image of hardship, but

according to Caldwell, it is this way of living that can provide "nourishment." In his own experience, a life of "softness and ease" "sickened" him, therefore Caldwell encourages Mazie to embrace her proletarian "roots" for "nourishment" in order to live a fulfilling life. It is through the efforts and pains of working life that Mazie can truly live, not just exist insignificantly.

Olsen showcases how the working-class culture of survival also finds ways to employ ingenuity. The potential creativity shines through in Olsen's depiction of the Nebraska packing town which the Holbrooks move to after failing at tenant farming. There, the Holbrooks live "Over the cobbled streets, past the two blocks of dump and straggling grass, past the human dumpheap where the FrankLloydWrights of the proletariat have wrought their wondrous futuristic structures of flat battered tin cans, fruit boxes and gunny sacks, cardboard, and mother earth" (48). Although the Holbrooks new home lies near a filthy area, "past the two blocks of dump," where even "straggling grass" has difficulty thriving, the community has found ways of making the most of the landscape. Despite living in a "human dumpheap," crowded and messy, this community contains "FrankLloydWrights of the proletariat" who have been able to create "wondrous futuristic structures." Following in Frank Lloyd Wright's steps, but without his formal education, these poor people design and build structures that have utility and make use of the environment. Though only equipped with "flat battered tin cans," "fruit boxes," "gunny sacks," "cardboard," and "mother earth," the community does not simply model itself after existing architectural designs. Instead they create "futuristic structures." Without degrees in architecture and with only garbage at their disposal, they exhibit the skills and resourcefulness that are developed in response to their working-class needs and

experiences. They also indicate a desire to brighten their otherwise dirty and lifeless community.

Olsen not only depicts the possibilities for creativity that lie within working-class culture, but she also provides examples of effective proletarian learning. One of these takes place at the local dump. Among the items which have been thrown away at the dump, the children feel a sense of belonging as they too have been discarded by the privileged members of society. At the dump, proletarian children are productive learners because they can take control of their own educational paths, making them more invested in their learning. They do not feel alienated from each other or from adults at the dump, where freedom and play reign. In contrast to the school's restrictions, shaming, pathologizing, categorizations, and alienation, the dump offers opportunities for creativity, communal activity, and freedom as the children engage in practical and relevant learning. Olsen writes that:

> The cramp the clamp of school released enough, the children of packingtown turn from June wilderness to deeper, more ancient play.
>
> On the dump, territory is established, shifted, abandoned, fought over, combined. Peerers, combers, and excavators go treasure hunting. (They compete with old men and women looking for covering, furnishings, sustenance—anything usable, transformable, barterable, salable.) Children—already stratified as dummies in school, condemned as unfit for the worlds of learning, art, imagination, invention—plan, measure, figure, design, invent, construct, costume themselves, stage dramas; endlessly—between tasks, errands, smaller children to be looked

> after, dailinesses—live in passionate absorbed activity, in rapt make-believe.
>
> On the inexhaustible dump strange structures rise: look-out towers, sets, ships, tents, forts, lean-tos, clubhouses, cities and stores and train tracks, cabooses, pretend palaces—singularly fitted with once furnishings, never furnishings, or nothing at all. (103)

For the children of "packingtown" school is as painful as a "cramp" and they feel it constraining them like a "clamp" from which they long to be "released." While the children have negative reactions to school, the summer break gives them the opportunity to engage in more natural and innate sorts of learning in "ancient play," activity which is enjoyable and self-directed. In contrast to feeling coerced into school, the children are invested in the learning activities at the dump, going there eagerly "between tasks, errands, smaller children to be looked after, dailinesses." The burden of the slaughterhouse is released at the dump and the children feel free to enjoy themselves. They seek release from the school which restricts the scope of their education, but find the dump "inexhaustible" as a source of desirable learning through play. At school they are sorted and separated into grade levels by age and ability, "stratified" shamefully "as dummies," but at the dump they work together and excel in the learning they set out to achieve. The classroom tension between adult teachers and children is absent at the dump, where children are on a more equal footing with adults there as they "compete with old men and women," side by side. Whereas the school makes them feel "condemned as unfit for the worlds of learning, art, imagination, invention," they actively enter these worlds at the dump, where they "plan, measure, figure, design, invent,

construct, costume themselves, stage dramas." The children demonstrate that they can "plan," or think ahead, "measure" and "figure," with precision, imaginatively "design," "invent" creative solutions to problems, "construct" what they have imagined, transform themselves through "costume," (whereas at school they are fixed and pathologized), and they can "stage dramas," working together to create scenarios and express a range of emotions. There is more productivity in the learning at the dump because the children "live in passionate absorbed activity" there, demonstrating a passion and investment that they lack in the school setting. In their activities at the dump, the children are "Peerers, combers, and excavators," as they pay close attention to their work, evaluate the value of items as they sift through them, and discover on their own.

Learning at the dump is not only playful, but also practical as the children find "anything usable, transformable, barterable, salable." In contrast to the tomb-like classroom, the dump allows children to feel alive since they are able to express some of their aggressive emotions, but in a healthy, fleeting manner, as "territory is established, shifted, abandoned, fought over, combined." In this way, the children are able to channel their emotions, but also move on in order establish or claim their own space or territory, but also work communally with one another to maintain balance. At the dump children chart their own course for learning, using their creativity as well as their aesthetic and collaborative problem-solving skills while they work with their hands and their imaginations to make use of discarded material. With the refuse at the dump, children are able to create structures such as "look-out towers, sets, ships, tents, forts, lean-tos, clubhouses, cities and stores and train tracks, cabooses, pretend palaces—singularly fitted with once furnishings, never furnishings, or nothing at all." Spaces for play, these

structures also exhibit the children's practicality. The "look-out towers" and "forts" offer protection, "sets" enable communal entertainment, "ships" allow for imaginary travel that expands their world and takes them to places they have yet to explore, "tents" and "lean-tos" provide shelter, "clubhouses" are places to gather, "cities and stores and train tracks, cabooses" make up commercial activity, and "pretend palaces" enable the children to experience the riches and luxury that are denied to them. Transforming trash into treasure not only promotes the children's creativity, but it also teaches them about thrift, recycling, and appreciation of hidden beauties. Because they have tangible outputs to show for their learning, the children's investment in these educational activities increases as well as their sense of accomplishment.

Similarly, Anna can offer Mazie important learning experiences which are applicable to the demands of her everyday life. She teaches her children about thrift, the natural world, and the self—offering another healthy model for education. Although Anna has little formal education, she possesses and passes down to her children skills and information which are crucial to her family's survival. Anna's pedagogy shines through when she uses her horticultural knowledge to take her children foraging for dandelion greens. Mother and children enter an affluent neighborhood to forage in a vacant lot which contains a small patch of green space. There, Anna shows the children how to work communally, pick the most succulent dandelions, identify a catalpa tree, and how to suck honey from its flowers. Anna also teaches the children important practical survival skills as well as how to explore and play in nature. Her interactions with the children as they pick dandelions show them how to take pleasure in labor and expose them to a more

fruitful relationship with adults that contrasts with the alienation they feel with their teachers. Anna engages the children in learning as,

> She bent to gather again, went on talking. "One Year when I was high as you, Mazie, we lived in a place where was a tree like that. The leaves aren't rightly out yet, but when they are, they get the biggest leaves ever you saw, heart-shaped, and then that tree gets cigars. We'll come back fall time, you'll see."
>
> […] In between gathering she sucked blooms, and Mazie saw that each time before, she drew her breath in deep to smell, deep as if she had to blow off dandelion heads or pop a paper bag. A remote, shining look was on her face, as if she had forgotten them, as if she had become someone else, not their mother anymore. Mazie felt like yelling, in rancor, in fear; jumping up, snapping her fingers into that dreaming face to bring attention, consciousness of them back, make it the old known face again. *Snap my fingers.* But her fingers were moving deftly, happily; cool slim mindless tracing down the notched leaves to the roots, the responsive tug, the tiny spurt of juice spilling its spicy smell.
>
> A peace and content began to drowse through her. (100)

Anna shows the children how to treasure the unwanted as they make use of nutritious plants which others consider weeds. She joyously works alongside the children while interacting with them, telling them about herself, teaching them about plants and trees, and showing them how to enjoy their labor by sucking the blooms in between gathering. This contrasts sharply with the Mazie's negative learning experiences at school and her

perception of her teacher as another species, a waddling duck, who shames and reprimands her. Unlike the teacher, Anna demonstrates that she has specific knowledge which is useful to them and which has not been gained through formal education. She teaches the children how to forage for food and how to identify the catalpa tree's stages of growth. In this exercise, Anna teaches the children how to nourish themselves, while the lessons at school leave the children hungry and tired. Anna also illustrates that it is important to understand the natural world in order to get in touch with one's own nature. In this natural environment, Anna sheds the burdens imposed by the daily grind of working-class motherhood and she becomes "someone else, not their mother anymore." This "someone else" becomes "remote," her own person separate from her children. Here, not only does Anna find her own subjectivity, but she also demonstrates that a person can be dynamic, capable of change, transformative. Her face is "shining" because she basks in her own transformation and the sense of self that she has found in nature. Though Mazie "felt like yelling, in rancor, in fear," apprehensive and self-conscious about being a working-class family foraging in a middle-class neighborhood, Anna soothes her through touch and closeness. Like the dump, but unlike the school, the space of foraging enables Mazie to distance herself from the pains of her life as "peace and content began to drowse through her." Later in the scene Anna continues to comfort her daughter as "She began stroking Mazie's hair in a kind of languor, a swoon. Gently and absently she stroked. […] A fragile old remembered comfort steamed from the stroking fingers into Mazie, gathered to some shy bliss that shone despairingly over suppurating hurt and want and fear and shamings—the Harm of years." (101). Anna's "stroking fingers" release "a fragile old remembered comfort" in Mazie. The relief and "shy bliss"

which these "stroking fingers," create for Mazie teach her how to mentally and emotionally overcome "suppurating," or festering "hurt" as well as the "want," "fear," and "shamings" that are produced by "the Harm of years," a life lived in poverty. Leading by example and through love and touch, Anna shows Mazie a method for surviving "the Harm of years" that working life involves. She teaches Mazie that she can turn to the natural environment to find herself and release the pains brought on by a life of hardship. Anna does this by enacting her own subjectivity and by allowing Mazie to explore it for herself, instead of directing her. Both at the dump and with Anna, the children are able to access learning experiences which are relevant, dynamic, and conducive to further intellectual development.

In his essay "Culture is Ordinary," Raymond Williams proposes changes to the educational system that might enable healthy, democratic forms of learning like those Olsen represents at the dump and in the dandelion field. Like Olsen, Williams explores the ways in which capitalists societies' formal schooling systems are problematic for the working-class people, but Williams goes further in offering solutions to the problems highlighted in *Yonnondio*. Though Olsen demonstrates alternative forms of learning that are rooted in working-class experience and that showcase the capacity and potential of even the poorest people, Williams, as a political writer and cultural critic, offers a more programmatic view of proletarian education. According to Williams, in order to establish a democratic, and therefore inclusive educational system, our understanding of culture and education must undergo a revolution. Culture needs to be thought of as more dynamic and comprehensive, the laboring class and their culture need to be valued and

dominant misconceptions confronted, and the goals and content of educational institutions should be completely transformed. Williams' proposed solutions imagine a more productive educational environment not only for working-class people, but for the whole of society.

Because capitalist societies like mid-twentieth century Britain and the United States focus mainly on elite culture and ignore the agency of working people to contribute to and shape culture, educational content omits the experiences of ordinary, working-class people who make up the majority in our societies. Williams offers an ambitious and dynamic view of the cultural process. As he explains, "The making of a society is the finding of common meanings and directions, and its growth is an active debate and amendment under the pressures of experience, contact, discovery, writing themselves into the land. The growing society is there, yet it is also made and remade in every individual mind" (4). He also writes that "the nature of a culture" is "that it is always both traditional and creative; that it is both the most ordinary meanings and the finest individual meanings" (4). Williams defines culture as the "common meanings" which are the "traditional" or historical aspects of a society that are passed down from generation to generation, but he emphasizes that part of a society's "growth" and expansion involves the "creative," or constructive, aspects of culture. He insists that culture is a *dynamic process* that includes "active debate" and "amendment" in which every individual participates in shaping culture through their own "experience, contact, discovery" that get written into the land. Williams condemns those who define culture in a limited, elitist way. He takes issue when culture is simply taught and displayed as traditional and elitist to the exclusion of ordinary people's input, mocking the

"extraordinary decision" of some elites "to call certain things culture and then separate them, as with a park wall, from ordinary people and ordinary work" (5). Ordinary, working-class people, he contends, reject that type of culture: "if that is culture, we [working-class people] don't want it; we have seen other people living" (5). That is, working-class people will reject culture that they feel they are not actively participating in; having "seen other people living," they value their own culture, which they shape and take part in.

For this reason, Williams rejects the commonly propagated misconception that ordinary people do not possess the capacity for cultural participation and creation as he points out that laborers are capable not only of engaging with elite culture, but also of cultivating a rich culture of their own. Williams explains that societies have construed the false equation "between popular education and the new commercial culture: the latter proceeding inevitably from the former" (11). In other words, many elites believe that popular education will surely lead to a degraded commercial culture because it is expected that ordinary people are not able to use their educational attainment for fine cultural contributions, but are only capable of low culture. Countering this false equation, Williams asserts, "I don't believe that the ordinary people in fact resemble the normal description of the masses, low and trivial in taste and habit […] there are in fact no masses, but only ways of seeing people as masses." He contends, further, "lowness is not inherent in ordinary people" (11). In this statement Williams points out that "in taste and habit," or way of living, ordinary people are not "low and trivial": ordinary people's culture should not be considered lesser than elite culture and ordinary culture is not meaningless or insignificant. He also deconstructs the notion that ordinary people can be

categorized as a single unit, as "masses." In reality, there are "only ways of seeing people as masses" because ordinary people do not actually live as "masses," but as unique individuals who should be appreciated as such despite the "normal description," a stereotype, that incorrectly pathologizes these individuals and leads to a reductive perception of "masses." Through the stereotyping of working people, it is also incorrectly believed that lowness is "inherent in ordinary people." Williams staunchly opposes this misconception, as his own experience as a member of the working-class has shown him otherwise.

Though ordinary people are marginalized in the elite culture promulgated by inequitable societies, Williams demonstrates that they engage with those cultural practices while they create their own thriving culture. Describing his own childhood, he explains that "At home we met and made music, listened to it, recited and listened to poems, valued fine language," and he asserts that "I know from the most ordinary experience, that the interest is there, the capacity is there" (5-6). From his own working-class experience, Williams knows that ordinary people seek out and are able to appreciate the culture that elites engage with. For Williams, that is because "An interest in learning or the arts is simple, pleasant and natural" (7); "lowness is not inherent in ordinary people," but every human being is naturally drawn to learning (discovery, curiosity) and the arts (beauty, aesthetics). He goes on to state that "There is a distinct working-class way of life, which I for one value […] I think this way of life, with its emphasis on neighbourhood, mutual obligation, and common betterment, as expressed in the great working-class political and industrial institutions, is in fact the best basis for any future English society" (8). Not only does Williams value working-class culture, but he believes

that it is the foundation for the best future of his society. He describes the neighborly, democratic, and communal aspects of working-class practices which would contribute positively to all of English society.

It is through the appreciation, understanding, and inclusion of ordinary people that Williams believes schools can be reformed to become truly democratic institutions. To begin with, Williams proposes that *all* people should have access to quality education. The current educational system is exclusionary, with a certain portion of the population restricted from gaining a decent education. As Williams points out and rejects, this is because it is deemed "that there is a hard maximum number—a fraction of the population as a whole—capable of really profiting by a university education, or a grammar school education, or by any full course of liberal studies" and "We are told that this is not a question of what we might personally prefer, but of the cold hard fact of human intelligence, as shown by biology and psychology" (14). The misperception that only a fraction of the population, which come overwhelmingly from the upper rungs of the social ladder, is capable of profiting from the educational system is rooted in the pathologizing of working-class people as ignorant masses. Pathologizing working people through biology and psychology simply serves to mask class bias. When any poor people are given access to formal education, it is only a small portion. Williams was one of those few, as he received a scholarship to Cambridge University. Of receiving this scholarship Williams remarks, "it is still very obvious that only the *deserving* poor get much educational opportunity, and I was in no mood, as I walked about Cambridge, to feel glad that I had been thought deserving; I was no better and no worse than the people I came from" (7). By rejecting the notion that he was an especially gifted and deserving student,

Williams takes on a political stance in which he repudiates the exclusionary and undemocratic policies of elite educational institutions. As Williams states, only the working people who are chosen by elite institutions such as Cambridge are thought of as deserving and able to benefit from education. But, the reality is that many working-class people would flourish at these institutions and are simply left out.

In order to establish democratic educational practices, Williams also re-conceptualizes the purpose and outcomes of learning. He proposes that schools should focus on personal human growth, rejecting the notion that education should be focused on creating laborers and patriots. Williams writes, "I cannot accept that education is a training for jobs, or for making useful citizens (that is, fitting into this system). It is for a society's confirmation of its common meanings, and of the human skills for their amendment. Jobs follow from this confirmation: the purpose, and then the working skill" (14). By simply "training for jobs," the educational system assumes that the purpose of a person's life is to labor. On the other hand, an educational system can begin by exposing students to "common meanings," or traditional culture, and then encourage students to practice their "human skill" of creativity to amend those meanings through their own lived experiences. This active process will lead students to find for themselves their "purpose," that is their passion and aims, and to choose the "working skill," or practical way to pursue that passion. Similarly, training people to be "useful citizens" does not encourage exploration of that person's experience of nation, nor does it invite input about its future development. Citizens should not merely be "useful" in conforming to the existing political system; in a democratic school they would create their own values and social aims by critically and consciously examining the world around them. In this way,

democratic education would focus more broadly on individual human development and growth than the current educational system which serves the purpose of "fitting" people into the status quo.

Once working people are actively present in schools and the system focuses on comprehensive human fulfillment, content will have to change, accordingly, to foster democratic educational practices. Williams promotes "the rethinking of content" (14) and the "redesign [of] our syllabuses to a point of full human relevance and control" (15). Democratic education would require abandoning old ways of designing courses and the refashioning of educational content so that it has "full human relevance" by being inclusive of the whole spectrum of students' experiences. The content of democratic education would expose students to both elite and working-class cultures, enriching their knowledge of the whole human experience and providing relevance for students of all different types of backgrounds. Having "full human control" means that each student would have the capability to influence the classroom environment and the content by asking questions, testing their own experiences against the material, and rejecting or proposing lessons. This allows students to take responsibility for their own educations and to derive more pleasure in learning at school. Thus, teacher-student relationships would be radically different in democratic classrooms, which would be spaces for problem-solving, discovery, and participation in democratic practices. Though Williams writes of the undemocratic practices of British schools in the 1950's, his arguments hold true for the 21st century educational system in the United States, which continues to relegate poor people to the worst schools. Williams writes that these circumstances polarize societies by widening the gap between high literacy and common literacy "to the

great damage of both, and with great consequent tension" (15). Then Williams goes on to claim that "We must emphasize not the ladder but the common highway, for every man's ignorance diminishes me, and every man's skill is a common gain of breath" (15). When societies allow for only a small portion of the population to achieve success, they create "great tension" between those who have access to opportunities and those who do not. This does great damage to all sides. That is because "every man's ignorance diminishes me" since I am morally responsible to my fellow human beings and because "every man's skill is a common gain of breath" since every individual contributes to society as a whole. Since every person depends on every other, it follows that it benefits me to have a society full of skilled people. Ultimately, Williams demonstrates that democratic education would be beneficial to the whole of a society as it strengthens each individual.

Although they were written about twenty years apart from each other, many parallels can be found between Tillie Olsen's novel of the 1930's, *Yonnondio*, and Raymond Williams' essay from the late 1950's, "Culture is Ordinary." *Yonnondio* illustrates Williams' idea that working people will reject institutions that represent culture as elitist and traditional while excluding working-class experiences and active input. Jim is angered by the fact that his children repeat the phrase "we-are-the-richest-country-in-the-worr-uld" at school and the students simply drowse along, barely participating. Mazie and her siblings adamantly reject the "onceuponatime and theylivedhappilyeverafter fairy tales" as well as the "adventure and magic books" which are available at the library because they represent the traditional aspects of culture which they are not active participants in and which are at odds with their experiences. These inherited cultural productions are dismissed by the children because they are useless artifacts, irrelevant to

the children's circumstances, time, and place. Instead, the children look to the "adventure and fairy ground of dump and city" where they can exercise control and find activities that are personally meaningful to them. Like Williams, Olsen also portrays the positive aspects of working-class culture. The Holbrook family's cultural practices have many resonances with Williams' experiences within his own family. There are many instances of communal singing in the novel, which bring the Holbrook family (and their working-class friends) together and they display their knack for aesthetics as they find beauty and use in objects which have been discarded at the dump, much as Williams' family engages with music, poetry, and fine language. Williams emphasizes the neighborliness of working-class culture as does Olsen in many scenes in *Yonnondio*, where neighbors help each other: the Holbrook family hosts the mid-summer dance on their Wyoming farm and the neighbors help each other with preparations; Mrs. Kryckszi, their neighbor in the packing town, helps around the house as Anna recovers from her miscarriage; and workers at the slaughterhouse help ease each other's work load and keep each other safe under dangerous working conditions. By demonstrating the fruitfulness of working-class culture, both works promote new ways of conducting the educational process so that members of the proletariat can achieve active learning in classroom settings. Olsen offers glimpses into what working-class education might look like through the undirected, dynamic, and relevant learning that occurs at the dump and the dandelion field. In these instances working-class children are able to take control of their own education, they are able to enact their passions and interests, and they feel invested in their learning. In his dynamic model of culture, Williams echoes Olsen's representation of active learning at the dump and in the dandelion scene. Williams advances democratic education as a way

of developing individual passions through content that has "full human relevance and control," just as the dump allows the children to make use of all of their experiences and skills as they take full control of their activities. At the dandelion field, Anna also allows the children to explore themselves on their own as she releases control to each of them. *Yonnondio* and "Culture is Ordinary" complement each other as the Holbrook family gives life and an emotional fullness to Williams' theory and cultural criticism.

Despite the many similarities between the two works, *Yonnondio* and "Culture is Ordinary" accomplish different tasks and offer some divergent perspectives on working-class culture. In his theoretical work, Williams can be more politically prescriptive and go further in his commentary of the issues surrounding working-class educational needs and his proposal of solutions to those problems, whereas Olsen's work explores these areas through particular characters and circumstances as she focuses on the Holbrook family specifically. At the same time, Olsen's work can take the reader further in understanding working-class issues through the vivid emotions she evokes in sensuous details and scenarios. Her work is also more emotional because Olsen sheds light not only on the positive aspects of working-class culture, but also the painful struggles endured by poor people and the damage done to them by exploitation and poverty. Williams portrays working life as strong and resilient, without acknowledging that the dominant culture does great harm as it marginalizes that way of life and exploits the people. Olsen, on the other hand, demonstrates the pain which fills the Holbrooks' lives. She portrays the violence and lack of solidarity that can result from the pressures of economic exploitation, deprivation, and rage. While Mazie shines through as a bright child, she often feels shamed by her poverty. The Holbrook family starves, struggles,

suffers, and members of the family do harm to each other. Perhaps, the deep sadness which is conjured by *Yonnondio* makes it a more difficult text to read than "Culture is Ordinary," which invokes a more hopeful tone. In the end, reading them together offers an enhanced picture of working-class life. They are both crucial works for beginning to understand and help the damaged, but vibrant members of the proletariat.

While the classroom may turn proletarian children away from books, *Yonnondio* and "Culture is Ordinary" reclaim books for working people. Both works are cultural productions by working people about working-class culture. As a working-class person myself, I found the texts compelling. They resonated with my own experiences despite their distance from me in time. At the same time, Olsen and Williams had much to teach me about analyzing my history as a member of the proletariat. Though I personally felt alienation at school, I could not pinpoint why my community could not find solidarity. Olsen explains how working-class children are prevented from joining together as they are weighed down by the burdens they carry from their difficult home lives into the classroom. It is also difficult for these children to become invested in school because the content is unappealing and outright insulting to their lived experience. Poor children are not innately lazy, apathetic, and unmotivated, but they sometimes behave that way because they do not connect with their teachers and each other or the irrelevant and useless material which does nothing to help ease the mountain of difficulties they face on a regular basis. In their descriptions of proletarian cultural practices, Olsen and Williams also taught me to be proud of my roots. Though the scars of living in poverty never heal or stop aching, these authors allowed me to focus on the positive effects of the struggles I surmounted. Facing the challenges of my own working class childhood has made me

strong and prepared in many ways. Williams' writing helped me to acknowledge that there is a working-class culture that has many positive aspects to appreciate. Since reading *Yonnondio* and "Culture is Ordinary" I feel proud to say that I grew up in and continue to be part of the working class. It is my hope that our societies can value working life for the values and lessons it has to teach—all of which can contribute to a less materialistic and more just world. It is through our educational practices that we can build an environment that honors and draws from the lives of working people.

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